

MARX'S *AUFHEBUNG* OF PHILOSOPHY AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF A MATERIALIST SCIENCE OF HISTORY

JOSEPH FRACCHIA

The relation between theory and historical analysis is perhaps the most often acknowledged, yet least precisely defined, element of Marx's project. Marx and Engels both wrote several letters insisting on the tentative nature of their theoretical works and on the need for continued study of history. Since, however, they never systematically and unambiguously defined the exact purpose and place of historical studies in their larger project, the debate over this relation seems to have been renewed every generation.

The most recent round of this debate began with the publication of Louis Althusser's works in the mid-1960s. Althusser's structuralist Marxism focuses on "synchronic" structures and dialectical materialist philosophy and includes an attack on the "diachronic" — history — and its study. This attack quickly led to several responses in defense of the diachronic as a necessary element of Marx's historical-materialist project. In his *Geschichte und Struktur* Alfred Schmidt replied to Althusser by explaining the historical content of Marx's "structuralist" categories. In performing this important task Schmidt concentrated on the theoretical dimension, and although he alluded to the relation between this and Marx's historical writings, he did not explain the place and role of historical studies beyond its contribution to the construction of categories. Insofar as he focused on this issue, E. P. Thompson's polemic against Althusser, *The Poverty of Theory*, complements Schmidt's analysis. Although Thompson convincingly shows the need for continued historical study as the means of making Marx's theory concrete, he does not derive this need from a systematic analysis of Marx's writings. He maintains, on the contrary, that "the time has gone by for this kind of textual exegesis."¹

In view of the recent treatment of Marx's theory by poststructuralists or postmodernists, however, the time for such a textual exegesis may have come again. The inadequate understanding of the intentionally tentative character of Marx's theoretical works, of the accompanying epistemological demand for historical analysis, of the dialectical tension between theory and empirical analysis, and, therefore, of Marx's open-ended definition of historical knowledge

1. E. P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (New York, 1975), 25.

has enabled such critics to dismiss Marx's theory as an archaic, "essentialist" approach to history. This is the case, for example, in a recent article by F. R. Ankersmit on "Historiography and Postmodernism."² Unlike the "essentialists," among whom he includes Marx, Ankersmit argues that "within the postmodernist view of history, the goal is no longer integration, synthesis, and totality."³ Instead, he maintains, the only thing left for historiography in the wake of postmodernism is to concentrate on "historical scraps," the "leaves of the historical tree" which "are relatively loosely attached to the tree" and which "when autumn or winter comes . . . are blown away by the wind."⁴ And to the question that might have been asked "fifteen or twenty years ago" of what the point of studying these "leaves" might be, he replies that this question of sense or meaning "has lost its meaning."⁵

Such a summary dismissal indicates that there is still (or once again) a need for a textual exegesis which will show that Marx did not take such an essentialist approach to history, that he did not reduce the "leaves" to manifestations of the essential "trunk" of the historical tree, that, rather than trying to write a "history of sense," he was trying to make sense out of history, that, in short, there is another possibility for historical analysis besides the extremes of essentialism and postmodernism. It might be added that the two best-known postmodernists, Foucault and Derrida, acknowledged more in Marx than Ankersmit has implied: Foucault maintained that "it is impossible to write history at the present time without using a whole range of concepts directly or indirectly linked to Marx's thought and situating oneself within a horizon of thought which has been defined and described by Marx"; and he wondered "what difference there could ultimately be between being a historian and being a Marxist."⁶ And Derrida emphasized the need for a theoretical elaboration of the relation between his own "limited" work and Marx's, an elaboration which was "still to come" (though he still has not undertaken it).⁷

This essay, of course, cannot even begin to undertake such theoretical elaborations. It can, however, contribute to such an undertaking by analyzing Marx's own critique of the "essentialist" tradition — his *Aufhebung* of philosophy — his materialist conception of history, the epistemological dilemmas resulting from that conception, and his solution of those dilemmas. Through such a reconstruction of Marx's project, it will be possible to define the relation between, and the epistemological value of, the two essential elements of his project: the theoretical inquiries and the historical studies. As a result of such an analysis, I hope to show that the "mature" Marx made no universalist or essentialist claims; rather

2. F. R. Ankersmit, "Historiography and Postmodernism" in *History and Theory* 28 (1989), 149.

3. *Idem.*

4. *Idem.*

5. *Idem.*

6. Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* (New York, 1980), 53.

7. Jacques Derrida, *Positions* (Chicago, 1981), 62–63.

he laid the epistemologically modest foundations of an experimental and open-ended materialist science of history (*materialistische Geschichtswissenschaft*⁸).

I

Marx based his *Aufhebung* of philosophy and materialist conception of history on a fundamental redefinition of the concepts of subject and object. Consequently, the first step of this undertaking is to look at the foundation of the philosophical tradition as Marx saw it and against which he developed his own theory.

Although they differed in their evaluations, both Hegel and Marx felt that the unity of the philosophical tradition lay in its consistent definition of the subject-object relationship. Since Socrates, Western philosophy had differentiated human beings from animals on the basis of the human capacity for Reason. In so doing philosophy chose to focus only on the differences and excluded the similarities. For the philosophers, human beings in their materiality cannot be distinguished from animals, and the body (and everything pertaining to it: material needs and manual labor as the means of satisfying those needs) is mired in the realm of necessity. As Socrates stated in no uncertain terms in *Phaedo* and as Plato graphically described in the "Allegory of the Cave," the body is enslavement of the mind and manual labor a life-sentence of servitude and ignorance.⁹ Aristotle, at least, admitted that the leisure necessary for philosophizing was dependent on the satisfaction of material needs, and he attributed the early development of mathematics in Egypt to the fact that the priestly caste very early became a leisure class.¹⁰ He neglected to mention, of course, that the manual labor of the many was the necessary precondition for the philosophizing of the few. The legacy of the first philosophers, then, was a particularistic definition of the human subject as the knowing subject and the object as the

8. The German term *Wissenschaft*, of course, cannot be directly translated into English as "science." Whereas the English term is laden with connotations of lawful regularity, predictability, and so on, the German term refers to the systematic study of, and body of knowledge about, a given subject.

9. In *Phaedo* Socrates launched a rather vehement attack on the body, which he saw as an "imperfection" contaminating the soul, the source of "innumerable distractions" from the search for truth and of diseases, it "fills us with loves and desires and fears and all sorts of fancies and a great deal of nonsense," and "wars and revolutions and battles are due simply and solely to the body and its desires." Consequently, "we are in fact convinced that if we are ever to have pure knowledge of anything, we must get rid of the body and contemplate things by themselves with the soul by itself." Plato, *Phaedo*, transl. Hugh Tredennick, in *Collected Dialogues*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (New York, 1961), 49, 95. See also the "Allegory of the Cave," *Republic* VII, transl. Paul Shorey, in *ibid.*, 747ff.

10. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, transl. Richard Hope (Ann Arbor, 1980), 5. The consistency of this philosophical attitude is indicated by Hegel's approving citation of Aristotle's comments on the underlying but immediately forgotten social prerequisite of mental labor. And in the *Philosophy of Right* Hegel goes to great lengths to justify this forgetfulness by exposing the irrelevance of material needs and labor to a philosophical definition of freedom (see the transition from bourgeois society to the state).

object of knowledge, and, in short, of philosophy as the only essentially human activity. Nature and the body were important to the philosophers only insofar as they could be known. Any other material attributes, physical needs and the praxis of satisfying those needs, were at best subordinate elements of the analysis and ultimately philosophically irrelevant.

For this reason, moreover, the first philosophers also concluded that the material dimension of life was ultimately irrelevant politically. Because of its innate dependence and mortality, the body and its needs could have only a subordinate place in the philosophical analysis of society and no place in a philosophical definition of freedom; for the philosophers the notion of material or economic freedom was a contradiction in terms. With the body and material needs deprived of any essential place in the definition of freedom, so, too, was the question of social and economic equality. The locus of freedom was thus effectively displaced onto, and limited solely to, the political sphere in which the individual could appear as a free citizen, not as a materially dependent human animal. Thus, along with the definition of the relationship between subject and object as one of knowledge, the definition of freedom in purely political terms became part of the legacy of philosophy.

Hegel unquestionably saw himself as a direct descendant of the Greek philosophers. He also saw himself as fortunate in living in the historical period in which the social world was on the verge of becoming rational and thus knowable. The problem with Greek society, he argued, was that freedom was limited to a certain class of people, and this lack of universality contradicted the definition of freedom itself. With the spread of the ideas of the French Revolution—the ideas of universal political freedom, elimination of arbitrary privilege, and the universal applicability of the law—however, Hegel believed he was witnessing the dawning of an age in which political institutions would finally become rational, that is, would finally fulfill the criteria of philosophy.¹¹ And since the real had become rational, philosophy could become absolute; this is why Hegel felt justified in depicting his work as leading, finally, to absolute knowledge. Hegel's notion of teleology, then, was based on the assumption that the promise of political freedom first raised by the Greek philosophers had been (or was about to be) realized; and since he saw his age as the one in which history had reached its goal, he could look back and comprehend the entire process. This is the modest meaning of his statement about the owl of Minerva beginning its flight at dusk.¹²

As Kierkegaard pointedly remarked, however: "The philosophers have built themselves palaces of ideas, but they live in hovels." And Marx gave this statement the materialist twist implied in Kierkegaard's wording. While not at all denying the importance of political freedom and civil rights, Marx came to feel that such freedoms were inadequate as long as the needs of the body were not

11. Kosmas Psychopedis, *Gesellschaftswissenschaftliche Begründung und historische Reflexion*, Habilitationsschrift an der Georg August Universität (Göttingen, 1981), 72.

12. G. W. F. Hegel, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, in *Werke* (Frankfurt, 1975), VII, 28.

satisfied. Thus, as he said, he “experienced . . . the *embarrassment* of having to take part in discussions on so-called material interests.”¹³

This realization that political freedom was merely formal as long as material needs were not satisfied, and therefore that the satisfaction of material needs is an essential prerequisite of freedom, led Marx to conclude that it was necessary to go beyond philosophy in order to realize its promise of freedom. This transcendence or *Aufhebung* of philosophy is what Marx claimed his own theory to be. But the matter is far more complex than a simple materialist inversion of Hegel's philosophy. Marx's *Aufhebung* of philosophy was based on a radical redefinition of the fundamental element of the Western philosophical tradition, the subject-object relationship, and it consisted of working through the consequences of this redefinition for the nature of intellectual labor.

Before looking specifically at this issue, the point should be made that most of the interpretative confusion about Marx's theory and the off-centered focus of much of the debate is a result of a problematic division between the so-called “young philosophical” and the “mature economist” Marx. The dividing line is generally drawn at the close of the revolutionary period of 1848–1850. This is, however, a false opposition; for by the revolutionary period Marx had already become (and would remain) first and foremost a theoretician and practitioner of historical science (*Geschichtswissenschaft*), not of philosophy or economics. And it was in that “youthful” work of 1845, the *German Ideology*, that he grounded himself firmly in history and laid the foundations for his “mature” analyses. As he then announced: “We recognize only one science, the science of history.”¹⁴

Although the *German Ideology* is often uncritically lumped together with the *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts* of the previous year, there is a vast difference between the two. Both were based on a materialist redefinition of subject and object. The process of redefinition, however, was not yet complete in the *Manuscripts*; their framework was still that of a materialist philosophy. In the *German Ideology*, on the other hand, Marx drew the necessary consequences of his materialist redefinition of subject and object; he made his “epistemological rupture” with his philosophical past¹⁵ and began to develop his materi-

13. Marx, Preface to *Critique of Political Economy*, in *Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert Tucker (New York, 1978), 3. Hereafter cited as *MER*.

14. Marx, *German Ideology* in *Marx-Engels Werke* [MEW] (Berlin, 1973), 18. In the manuscript Marx crossed out this statement and several following sentences of elaboration. While it is unclear why he did so, I will attempt to show that this statement perfectly summarizes Marx's project.

15. In borrowing the concept of “epistemological rupture” from Louis Althusser, I agree both with its applicability and with Althusser's determination of the *German Ideology* as the work in which Marx accomplished it. I also agree with his claim that though Marx in the *German Ideology* had made such a fundamental break, he had not yet completely developed his new project. Beyond these points of chronological agreement, my position on what this new project was is fundamentally different from Althusser's. While there is no time to discuss the difference in detail, its outlines can be summarized briefly. Althusser maintains that “by founding the theory of history (historical materialism), Marx simultaneously broke with his erstwhile ideological philosophy and established

alist science of history. In order to understand Marx's project, then, it is necessary to begin with the *German Ideology*. The following brief look at the framework and conceptual apparatus of the *Manuscripts* and the *German Ideology* will explain why this is so and provide the basis for defining and evaluating Marx's materialist science of history.

In the *Manuscripts* Marx, following Feuerbach's lead, defined the subject as the sensually-acting (*sinnlich-tätig*) subject and the object as the object of that action. But he went beyond Feuerbach and defined sensual activity more concretely as interaction with nature in the process of reproducing human life.¹⁶ With this definition, then, work had moved onto center stage in Marx's theoretical project.

At this stage, however, the conceptual framework of his theory was still that of Feuerbach. Although he focused on work, he did not view the primary purpose of work as the satisfaction of human *material* needs. Rather, he viewed labor as a means for people to realize their "species-essence" (*Gattungswesen*)¹⁷ and criticized the structure of work insofar as it prevents people from realizing that essence. Therefore, and despite his own concern with inequality and oppression, he defined the capitalist structure of work not as exploitative, but as "alienating" or "estranging" human beings from their essence.¹⁸ Because of this conceptual framework, the "poverty" which Marx discussed in 1844 was not primarily the material problem of scarcity, starvation, and so on; rather, it was the "idealist" poverty of an alienated humanity unable to realize its essence through its labor. This allowed the powerful critique of the stunted growth of human beings in capitalist society which he developed in the *Manuscripts* and which remained a theme throughout his entire work; however, this conceptual framework of essence and alienated appearance was extremely problematic.

The main problem was that Marx had only one foot on historical ground: because of his Feuerbachian framework, the analysis he presented in the *Manuscripts* was static and a priori. He described an historical problem, but he did

a new philosophy (dialectical materialism)." (In Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, transl. Ben Brewster [London, 1977], 33). My position, however, is that Marx's epistemological break was his break with, or *Aufhebung* of philosophy in general, and that his new project was not to develop a dialectical materialist philosophy of history but a materialist science of history which certainly contained a theoretical dimension that will be discussed below. See *For Marx*. For Althusser's own summary of his position, see his introduction to this work. For further comment on this issue, see note 26.

16. See Marx, *Economic-Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, in *MER*, 75–76.

17. While *Wesen* can be translated as either "being" or "essence," the use of the former diverts attention from the significance of the sixth Thesis on Feuerbach for the direction of Marx's development. In this thesis, Marx rejected the concept of the "human essence" (*menschliches Wesen*), which is essentially the same as the concept of "species-essence" (*Gattungswesen*) used in the *Manuscripts*. Both *Gattungswesen* and *menschliches Wesen* denote an a priori definition of a fixed human nature or essence; and it is precisely the fixed and a priori character of these concepts which Marx rejected and replaced with the notion of the "ensemble of social relations." This crucial conceptual shift can easily be overlooked by defining *Gattungswesen* as "species-being" rather than "species-essence."

18. Marx, *Manuscripts*, in *MER*, 70–81.

so in *ahistorical* concepts. He began with what he called “an actual economic fact,” that “the worker becomes all the poorer the more wealth he produces.”¹⁹ Then he proceeded to analyze this poverty in terms of a humanity alienated from its essence. He did not and could not explain, however, the historical origins of the problem nor show clearly why there is a concrete possibility of overcoming it. At this point, he saw alienation as a necessary step in the evolution of humanity; and the basis of his anticipation of going beyond that alienation was a philosophical dialectic whose dynamic principle is the *logical* necessity of the negation of the negation, the abstract need for an alienated humanity to recapture its essence. This philosophical framework and conceptual apparatus prevented the development of the insights gained from the materialist redefinition of subject and object.²⁰

Marx's focus on work, however, quickly led him to the realization that its essential goal was not to realize a “human essence,” but to make possible the existence of any “human essence.” This, in turn, forced him to acknowledge that the content of his materialist definition of subject and object as a relation of human beings interacting with nature in order to satisfy their material needs could not be contained by his philosophical framework, to realize that his new definition of subject and object demanded a commensurately historical conceptual apparatus. This work of planting both feet firmly on historical ground is what Marx together with Engels carried out in the *German Ideology*, the unpublished work intended “to settle accounts with [their] erstwhile philosophical conscience” and in which they “had achieved [their] main purpose—self-clarification.”²¹

The most obvious and most often overlooked element of this “self-clarification” is the fate of the two central categories of the *Manuscripts*. First, in the “Theses on Feuerbach,” which serve as the preface to the *German Ideology*, Marx rejected the concept of Species-Essence. In criticizing Feuerbach's abstraction from the historical process, he wrote: “Feuerbach resolves the religious essence into the human essence. But the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations.”²² Here Marx clearly and categorically rejected the ahistorical notion of any fixed and a priori essence of human beings. And he replaced it with a notion of “real living individuals”²³ who are conditioned by the world in which

19. *Idem*.

20. Since the publication of the *Manuscripts* there has been a widespread tendency to view them as the basis of all of Marx's subsequent works. To mention only a few, but widely read analyses of this kind: Shlomo Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx* (Cambridge, Eng., 1968); Bertell Ollman, *Alienation: Marx's Concept of Man in Capitalist Society* (Cambridge, Eng., 1971); and more recently, Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia* (New York, 1986). As will be shown below, however, this attempt to base all of Marx's works on the *Manuscripts* overlooks Marx's own critique of them, particularly of their central categories, in the *German Ideology*.

21. Marx, Preface, 5–6. See also Marx's letter to Karl Leske, in which he wrote: “It seemed to me very important that a work polemicising against German philosophy and current German socialism should precede my positive construction [of an economic analysis of capitalism].” in *MEW* XXVII, 448.

22. Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach” in *MER*, 145.

23. *German Ideology*, *MER*, 155.

they live and which they themselves produce and reproduce.²⁴ With this historicized definition of the formation of human natures, Marx had cleared the way to begin an analysis of real human beings in their concrete historical activity.

This thoroughly historicized perspective on human beings also forced Marx to rethink the causes of, and to redefine, the unhappy state in which he found them. Accordingly, “alienation” (*Entfremdung*), the other central concept of the *Manuscripts*, also disappeared or, at least, lost its previous position of primacy. Although this concept pervaded the *Manuscripts*, it is virtually nonexistent a year later in the *German Ideology*. Marx put the term in quotation marks and used it, as he sarcastically stated, “only in order to remain comprehensible to the philosophers.”²⁵ In its place he introduced the concept of exploitation which is concretely rooted in the ensemble of human social relations and which would be eliminated not through any logical necessity, but only through the political action of the proletariat based on the *practical* necessity of self-emancipation.

Having discarded the inherited philosophical terminology of essence and alienation and his fixed a priori framework, Marx had cleared the way for the consistent materialist analysis of the content of history undertaken in the *German Ideology*. This work, as an attempt at “self-clarification,” is somewhat repetitious and groping and often seems to contain leaps in logic. Although it took Marx over two decades to develop satisfactory solutions to some of the problems raised here, the *German Ideology* does mark the end of one stage in Marx’s evolution and the beginning of another. For in it he completed his attempt to develop a fully materialist and historicized determination of the concepts of subject and object and therewith of the content of history, and he made a first attempt to define the epistemological and methodological consequences of his new conception of history.²⁶

24. Two points need to be made about Marx’s replacement of the concept of “species-essence” with the “ensemble of social relations.” First, the ensemble of social relations is meant in neither a deterministic nor an economically reductionist sense. The single most important element in this ensemble is, for Marx, class. But it is not the only factor nor, necessarily, the determining causal factor in a given historical event. In contrast to a Hegelian-like approach, individuals are not defined simply as manifestations of their “class essence.” Rather, the ensemble of social relations which shape personality, consciousness, and behavior encompasses not only the relations of production, but all social relations: education, socialization, culture, and so on. (See Oskar Negt, “What is a Revival of Marxism and Why do We Need One Today?,” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* [Urbana, Ill., 1988], 221, 227–230).

The “ensemble of social relations,” then, defines the specific world in which individuals live and which gives structure to their choices, but does not determine how they will choose. The second point is that since social relations change, so does the character or “nature” of human beings. This does not mean that there are no constants in human life. As Perry Anderson has argued, Marx’s conception of those constants “clearly has a biological origin, in the sense that the human physiognomic structure is that of a specific animal species [which] endows us with certain potentials, physical powers, and certain dispositions as well” (See Perry Anderson, Discussion, in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, 334). It simply means that the specific character of human beings in a given era cannot be determined a priori, but only in reference to the ensemble of social relations.

25. Marx, *German Ideology*, in *MER*, 161.

26. How sharp was this break? That depends. If the focus is on Marx’s evolution as a thinker, his intellectual biography, then it is clear that the *German Ideology* developed organically (*naturwüchsig*) from the materialist dimension of Marx’s formulation of the problem of human freedom

Developing his materialist conception through a critique of German philosophy as “devoid of premises,”²⁷ Marx began the first section of the *German Ideology* by stating his own. These premises “are not arbitrary ones, not dogmas, but real premises from which abstraction can only be made in the imagination. They are the real individuals, their activity, and the material conditions under which they live, both those which they find already existing and those produced by their own activity.”²⁸ This “existence of living human individuals” is the first premise of history and points toward “the first fact to be established,” namely: “the physical organization of these individuals and their consequent relation to the rest of nature.”²⁹ A total analysis of human history would include studies of the anatomical structure of the human species and of the “geological, orohydrographical, climatic” structure of the natural world with which human beings interact in the labor process.³⁰ Marx, however, felt justified in not going into such detail because he assumed that the historically relevant data from such analyses would automatically assert themselves in a concrete historical-materialist study of the mode and relations of production.

As in the *Manuscripts* Marx continued to argue that production is the essential characteristic of the human species. His purpose here, however, was not to measure the degree of estrangement from a “human essence.” Rather, because he had dissolved the category of human essence into the “ensemble of social relationships,” his primary concern was to explain that social relations are developed and given structure according to the ways in which human beings satisfy their material needs. Having established the crucial importance of the relations of production, Marx in this first section then gave specific examples of their various forms. These examples need not concern us here. More important is the general statement explaining the succession of these forms which he stated in the second section.

After reiterating the first premise concerning the existence of living human beings with real material needs whose life-activity depends on and revolves around the satisfaction of those needs, he made a “second point”: “the satisfaction of the first need (the action of satisfying, and the instrument of satisfaction which has been acquired) leads to new needs.”³¹ Implicit here is that this dynamic

in the *Manuscripts* and from the inadequacy of the solutions presented there. As I indicated above (note 15), the difference between the epistemological standpoints of the two works is far more drastic and is accurately characterized by Althusser’s use of the term “epistemological rupture.” For Althusser the *German Ideology* presents an entirely new “problematic” (*For Marx*, 66–67) and a new epistemological standpoint from which to engage this problematic; and together these two new elements constitute the inauguration of a new science. Despite my disagreement with Althusser in terms of how this new science is constituted, I agree that the *German Ideology* represents an “epistemological rupture” insofar as it rejects the essential and essentialist categories of the *Manuscripts*, provides a materialist definition of the content of history, and, as I will show below, recognizes and attempts to come to terms with the epistemological dilemma resulting from an historical-materialist delineation of the social locus of mental labor.

27. *Ibid.*, 155.

28. *Ibid.*, 149.

29. *Idem.*

30. *Ibid.*, 149–150.

31. *Ibid.*, 156.

of new needs and the development of new technologies to satisfy them is the necessary (but insufficient) force behind the evolution of social forms. This point appears to lend credence to those who want to view Marx as a technological determinist.³² Marx's purpose, however, was not to establish a law of necessary technological development and social evolution; rather he was simply delivering a materialist explanation of the impetus for technological development and, consequently, social evolution. As will be shown below, he intended this comment only as a general statement for purposes of orientation, not as an iron law of historical change.

The "third circumstance which . . . enters into historical development is that people, who daily remake their own life, begin to make other people, to propagate their own kind: the relation between man and woman, parents and children, the *family*."³³ The family, however is not just a biological entity. It is "in the beginning the only social relationship"³⁴—whence it follows that "the production of life, both of one's own in labour and of fresh life in procreation, now appears as a double relationship: on the one hand as a natural, on the other as a social relationship."³⁵ With this analysis of the socioeconomic function of the family and of human beings as necessarily social beings linked through both material production and biological reproduction, Marx broke decisively with the notion of human beings as primarily political animals and thus with the fetish of political freedom in the philosophical tradition. He also underscored his rejection of classical liberalism's view of human beings as originally Robinson Crusoes, as isolated individuals in a state of nature.

Finally, and only after having considered the material premises of human life, did Marx begin the treatment of consciousness. Despite the linear sequence of this presentation, Marx did not treat consciousness as a mere epiphenomenon, that is, he did not conceive consciousness as a simple mirror of the material basis. Rather he simply established, against traditional philosophy, that all forms of consciousness, even the apparently most transcendent, derive their content from the concrete materiality of human existence. As he said: "Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence, and the existence of men is their actual life-process."³⁶ As mentioned earlier (note 24), "life-process" means the totality of the experience of a given individual. The primary factor giving structure to an individual's life-process and outlook on the world is social geography, the position in the division of labor. Consciousness, however, cannot be reduced to class; it must be treated and analyzed as the lived experience

32. In recent years, the most meticulous defense of this interpretation is G. A. Cohen's *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* (Princeton, 1978). Cohen's attempt to prove that Marx's project resulted in a universal philosophy of history of which the progressive development of technology is the deterministic, driving force forced him into a difficult situation when it came to explaining the technological decline during the Middle Ages. See 154–155.

33. Marx, *German Ideology* in *MER*, 156.

34. *Idem*.

35. *Ibid.*, 157.

36. *Ibid.*, 154.

of human beings. This includes, of course, the consciousness of those performing such analyses, the mental laborers. This materialist outline of the social origins of the forms and content of consciousness thus has serious implications for the nature of intellectual labor.

Reversing the tradition dating back to Socrates, Marx came to view as self-deception the claim that in escaping the "subterranean cavern" in which the common people were dwelling, the philosopher had emerged into the dazzling light of truth (Plato): "Morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness thus no longer retain the semblance of independence. They have no history, no development; but men, developing their material production and their material intercourse, alter, along with this their real existence, their thinking and the products of their thinking."³⁷ Here Marx established a (non-reductionist) link between ideas and the material world. Consequently, he had to redefine the social locus of the knowing subject and of intellectual labor. In contrast to philosophy, for which the knowing subject was in the center and above the world it was observing, Marx had, to borrow a term from modern poststructuralism, "decentered" that subject. And he did so by defining the locus of intellectual labor as one branch *among*, rather than *above*, the other branches of the social division of labor. Marx's *Aufhebung* of philosophy, his version of a critique of Western "logocentrism," then, consisted of exposing the relation between mental and manual labor, the precise nature of which his philosophical predecessors had overlooked by privileging their own activity. This redefinition of the social locus of intellectual labor forced Marx to reject the conceptual absolutism inherent in the philosophical positing of the primacy of mind over body. As a result of this reduction of the power of thought, he confronted a difficult epistemological dilemma which he tried to solve by carrying out a radical reappraisal and recrafting of the tools of the intellectual trade.

The epistemological dilemma resulting from this is many-sided: historical materialist science must necessarily utilize the tools of thought in order to present reality, while knowing simultaneously that those tools necessarily abstract from its concrete diversity. Historical-materialist science recognizes the limits on the power of thought, but simultaneously wants not only to avoid relativism and skepticism, but also to present historical reality in its concrete totality. Historical-materialist science defines itself as one moment of the social division of labor, but wants to raise itself above its own limited perspective in order to gain knowledge of the whole. In short, precisely because its claims concerning the a priori power of intellectual labor are much more modest than those of traditional philosophy, historical materialist science confronts a much more difficult task in its attempt to reconstruct reality in thought. This is a problem which, ironically, arises *although*, and also *because* the starting point of this science is the concrete, material life-process of the real, historically existing and acting individuals.

37. *Ibid.*, 154–155.

II

The process through which Marx solved this dilemma was cautious, lengthy, and complex; it consisted of a two-step development of the epistemology and methodology of a materialist science of history. The first step was the easier since it was only negative. This was to acknowledge the dilemma and, through a critique of philosophy, to define precisely the limits on thought. Once this task had been completed, the very difficult second step was the positive building of historical science on a very modest epistemological foundation.

The first step of ascertaining the restrictions on the power of thought was part of the "self-clarification" in the *German Ideology*. Thinking through to their logical conclusion the epistemological consequences of a materialist conception of history, Marx in two extremely important paragraphs presented his critique of the philosophical approach to knowledge. He argued that because the study of real material human beings in their interaction with nature and with each other is the only adequate approach to the depiction of reality, "philosophy as an independent branch of knowledge loses its medium of existence."³⁸ With the end of such "speculation," the way had been cleared for "real, positive science, . . . the representation of the practical activity, of the practical process of development of [people]."³⁹ The most that remained to satisfy the philosophical propensity for universal statements is "a summing-up of the most general results which can be abstracted from the observation of the historical development of [people]."⁴⁰ However, he immediately added, "viewed apart from the study of real history," these statements are only "*abstractions* which have in themselves *no value whatsoever*."⁴¹ Their only remaining function is "to facilitate the arrangement of historical material, to indicate the sequence of its separate strata. But they by no means afford a recipe or schema, as does philosophy, for neatly trimming the epochs of history."⁴² In contrast to the philosophers, for whom universality is one key criterion of truth, Marx saw in universal statements only abstractions which ignored concrete historical particularity.

He did not, however, dispense with such statements altogether. He maintained that if consciously acknowledged as abstractions, such statements do have a function, albeit a limited one, as "guiding threads" (*Leitfaden*) to orient his empirical research.⁴³ And establishing the guiding threads was all that Marx

38. *Ibid.*, 155.

39. *Idem*. A comment on Marx's use of the notion of "positive science" is necessary here to avoid confusion. As these passages should make clear, Marx's use of this term is not to be confused with the positivism deriving from Comte which insists on inexorable laws of social evolution. Rather, it must be viewed in the context of his critique of his philosophical predecessors and contemporaries whose works Marx viewed as hopelessly abstract; and it refers, of course, to the need to study human beings empirically within the "ensemble of social relations" and in the concrete process of producing the means to satisfy their material needs.

40. *Idem*.

41. *Idem*, my emphasis.

42. *Idem*.

43. Marx, Preface to the *Critique of Political Economy*, in *MER*, 4. Marx uses the term "guiding threads" immediately preceding, and as a statement of the value of, his well-known summary of

was concerned to do in the general sketch of history in the *German Ideology*: the general overview of the content of history and the considerations of the nature of historical change are intended to be only a first sketch, not a finished portrait. The generally overlooked consequence of this modest definition of the role of the universal statement is that all of Marx's statements which *appear* to be making universal claims are actually conscious abstractions. As guides for the historical-materialist scientist they are useful abstractions; but, prior to being given content and corrected by the results of concrete historical-empirical analysis, they are simply abstractions, and certainly not statements of universal truth.

In the *German Ideology*, then, Marx redefined the content of history to match his materialist definition of the subject and object. He not only turned Hegel right side up, but also performed the critique of the philosophical approach to knowledge demanded by that inversion. The next step would be to go beyond critique and to define the positive content of a materialist science of history.

In his concluding comments to these paragraphs, Marx pointed to the directions his future work would take: "our difficulties begin only when we set about the observation and arrangement—the real depiction—of our historical material, whether of a past epoch or of the present. The removal of these difficulties is governed by premises which it is quite impossible to state here, but which *only the study of the actual life-process of the individuals of each epoch will make evident*."⁴⁴ Although it does not explicitly name the difficulties, this passage does indicate the two tasks involved in this second step: first, conducting empirical research and analyzing each era on its own terms; and second, solving the epistemological problems resulting from the historical-materialist reduction of the power of thought. Only upon having completed these tasks could Marx publish *Capital*, and his writings of the next two decades were therefore devoted to this dual purpose. Consequently, the first studies for *Capital*, the *Grundrisse* and the *Critique of Political Economy*, and even the final form of *Capital* itself are to be viewed not only as excavations of the capitalist economy, but also as experiments in historical-materialist epistemology.

In the remainder of this essay, I shall focus on the second task. In defining the elements of his historical-materialist science, I shall argue that Marx constructed *methodological* solutions to the epistemological problems resulting from his historical-materialist redefinition of the subject and object. The most important elements of this redefinition are: 1) the delineation of the object of analysis; 2) the development of a logic of presentation (*Darstellung*); 3) the determination of the epistemological value of *Capital*; 4) the role of historical writing in Marx's project. Only after having discussed these elements will it be possible to understand the full meaning and significance of Marx's *Aufhebung* of philosophy and the praxis of historical-materialist science.

the dynamics of historical change—a passage which many interpreters nevertheless hypostasize into an alleged materialist *philosophy* of history.

44. Marx, *German Ideology*, in *MER*, 155, my emphasis.

III

As mentioned above, Marx argued that it is necessary to view each era in terms of its own inner logic (or illogic as the case may be). Accordingly, the first methodological step in the analysis of any era is to delineate it, specifically, its mode of production. Since commodity production and exchange were not limited to the modern capitalist era, the delineation of the capitalist mode of production was not an easy task. Its difficulty is obvious from the two competing formulations found in the *German Ideology* and the complexity of the chapter in the *Grundrisse*, "Pre-Capitalist Property and Production," in which Marx finally differentiated the capitalist mode of production from its predecessors. The result of his long deliberations over this question, however, was a delineation of capitalism which both exposed its historicity and specified the limited range of his concept of teleology.

As he first stepped onto historical ground, Marx was not yet certain how precisely to define his analytical object: bourgeois society based on the capitalist mode of production. In the *German Ideology*, there are two mutually exclusive definitions of the relation between capitalist and precapitalist societies. On the one hand, and clearly influenced by his philosophical past, he defined bourgeois society as the "basis of all history."⁴⁵ This perfectly Hegelian formulation defines the bourgeois-capitalist present as the telos of the entire course of world history. Had Marx pursued this line of analysis, he would have written a materialist philosophy of history showing the logical necessity of the development from the first mode of production to the last, in which case his theory truly and simply would have been an inverted Hegelianism. On the other hand, the *German Ideology* also contains a comment on the arbitrary nature of technological development which undermined the possibility of a universal philosophy of history and which, after Marx worked out its consequences in the *Grundrisse*, became the basis of his presentation in *Capital*.

In discussing the evolution of technology Marx wrote that "it depends purely on the extension of commerce whether the productive forces achieved in a locality, especially inventions, are lost for later development or not. As long as there exists no commerce transcending the immediate neighborhood, every invention must be made separately in each locality, and mere chances such as irruptions of barbaric peoples, even ordinary wars, are sufficient to cause a country with advanced productive forces and needs to have to start right over again from the beginning."⁴⁶ Because, then, of the contingent character of technological development and of the constant threat of the loss of technology for most of human history, Marx found it impossible to posit bourgeois society as the telos of the entire course of world history—impossible, therefore, to write a philosophy of history which is both materialist and universal. It is, on the contrary, only relatively recently that technological development has acquired

45. *Ibid.*, 164.

46. *Ibid.*, 180.

its own immanent logic: "Only when commerce has become world commerce and has as its basis large-scale industry, when all nations are drawn into the competitive struggle, is the permanence of the acquired productive forces assured."⁴⁷ Here Marx clearly indicated that only the capitalist mode of production provides the material prerequisites for the preservation of technology and the material incentive for its development. With this differentiation of capitalism from previous modes of production, he was forced to limit both the historical application of categories derived from the capitalist mode of production and the range of his concept of teleology.

In the Introduction to the *Grundrisse* Marx discussed this issue of the limited applicability of categories from a later society. Although his statement that "human anatomy contains a key to the anatomy of the ape"⁴⁸ initially sounds as though he were repeating the formula about bourgeois society as the "basis of all history," his explanation shows that he now rejected the universal teleology inherent in earlier formulations. He was careful to emphasize that while the later society does provide a key to the character of its predecessor(s), categories from the later society cannot be directly and immediately applied to the former. He clarified this with the example of the "modern concept of labor" which "shows strikingly how even the most abstract categories, despite their validity—precisely because of their abstractness—for all epochs, are nevertheless, in the specific character of this abstraction, themselves likewise a product of historic relations, and possess their full validity only for and within these relations."⁴⁹ In conclusion he stated: "Although it is true . . . that the categories of bourgeois economics possess a truth for all other forms of society, this is to be taken only with a grain of salt. They can contain them in a developed, or stunted, or caricature form etc., but always with an essential difference."⁵⁰ Any analysis which does not recognize this difference is bound falsely to posit the present era as telos: "The so-called historical presentation of development is founded, as a rule, on the fact that the latest form regards the previous ones as steps leading up to itself, and, since it is only rarely and only under quite specific conditions able to criticize itself . . . it always considers them one-sidedly."⁵¹ Here Marx presented a critique not only of bourgeois universalizing of its own categories but also of his own earlier tendency to do the same. By the time he wrote the *Grundrisse*, the combination of his analysis of the conditions of technological development and a differentiated understanding of the applicability of historical categories led him to reject a universal application of the concept of teleology.

In the well-known chapter in the *Grundrisse*, "Pre-Capitalist Property and Production," Marx explained specifically the limited range of the categories of

47. *Idem.*

48. Marx, *Grundrisse*, in *MER*, 241.

49. *Idem.*

50. *Ibid.*, 242.

51. *Idem.*

bourgeois society; in so doing he completed his delineation of the capitalist mode of production and specified the limits of his use of teleology. To summarize briefly this conceptually difficult “flight to other modes of production,”⁵² there are two interrelated results of methodological import. In prebourgeois modes of production the pursuit of wealth is never a purpose unto itself; there is, therefore, no inherent logic to economic activity, nor to economic development. Economic activity is always subordinate to extra-economic ends;⁵³ thus, such “superstructural” elements as the *polis* in ancient Athens or the personal relations of domination in medieval society can be as essential as the mode of production in determining the form of socialization (*Vergesellschaftung*). In precapitalist societies, then, the “base” and “superstructure” are so inextricably intertwined that it is impossible analytically to isolate the “base” or adequately to understand the “essence” of such societies by focusing solely on the mode of production.

It is, on the contrary, the unique double characteristic of the capitalist mode of production that the pursuit of wealth is a purpose unto itself and functions according to the regularities of commodity exchange. For this reason the material or economic base can be isolated as an object of analysis. This is, it must be emphasized, a purely methodological consideration, not a reductionist theory of the relation between base and superstructure. It is, however, a crucial consideration which allowed Marx to determine the historical specificity of the capitalist mode of production. This methodological isolation of the economy from all other social spheres is nothing more than an explicit recognition of what all economists do. However as an explicit recognition based on an historical and qualitative differentiation between precapitalist and capitalist modes of production, it avoids hypostatizing those specifically capitalist characteristics (especially exchange value as the goal of production) into universal attributes of all modes of production and thereby reveals the historicity of capitalism.

In contrast, then, to Hegel’s philosophy of history which teleologically subsumed the entire course of history to its “result” and approached the past only as the prehistory of the present, Marx’s new method is quite different. His procedure did *not* equate the *prehistory of bourgeois society* with the *history of prebourgeois societies* in their own historical specificity. Because he viewed the history of prebourgeois societies as “arbitrary,” as subject to “mere chances,” he had to limit the extension of the concept of teleology to the earliest manifestation of a mode of production with its own immanent logic. He could not, therefore, write a universal philosophy of history. His goal was the more modest one of writing a genealogy and an anatomy of the capitalist mode of production

52. Marx, *Das Kapital* in *MEW* XXIII, 90.

53. Hence Marx’s comment that “we never find among the ancients a study of what form of landed property, etc. is the most productive, creates the greatest wealth. Wealth never appears as the purpose of production. . . . The study is always of what kind of property creates the best citizens.” *Grundrisse*, transl. Martin Nicolaus (New York, 1973), 487.

and an abstract biography of its life cycle. This life-cycle, beyond which Marx's concept of teleology cannot reach, began not with the protocapitalist exchange of the ancient world; rather, as he stated in the *Communist Manifesto*, it began with the rudimentary form of commodity production which emerged on the urban islands amid the medieval manorial economy and eventually, according to its own inherent dynamic, reclaimed the countryside.

IV

With this delineation of the capitalist mode of production Marx uncovered the foundation of bourgeois society and reached the starting point for the conceptual presentation which he developed in *Capital*. However, to understand the place of *Capital* in his project, it is first necessary to examine his considerations of the logic of the conceptual presentation and its epistemological value.

In the Afterword to the second edition of *Capital*, Marx distinguished the mode of presentation (*Darstellungsweise*) from the mode of inquiry (*Forschungsweise*). The mode of inquiry consists of collecting data about the various historical epochs. For Marx, however, the data which appear to the observer, the phenomena, are not isolated and independent facts which have meaning in and of themselves. In contrast to a purely empirical approach, he felt that the task of inquiry is to penetrate beyond surface appearances and to find the essential structure, that is, the structure within which phenomena gain their meaning and can correctly be interpreted. The goal of the inquiry, then, is not only to "appropriate the material in detail, to analyze its different forms of development," but also "to trace out their *inner bond* (*inneres Band*)."⁵⁴ In his analysis of capitalist society, of course, the penetration of the manifold diversity of appearances led to the conclusion that the inner bond is the commodity: the socialization (*Vergesellschaftung*) of the apparently isolated property owners and the reproduction of the society are mediated through the production and exchange of commodities. Only after the inner bond has been grasped, Marx continued, "can the actual movement be adequately described."⁵⁵

In formal agreement with Hegel, Marx defined the logic, the "scientifically correct method," of presentation as the "unfolding" of the categories, the ascent from the simplest category to the most concrete.⁵⁶ Having arrived at the inner bond as a result of the inquiry, the next step is to turn around and retrace the steps. The inner bond, which is the end point or goal of the inquiry, is thus the starting point of the presentation, and the course of the presentation consists of developing the increasingly concrete categories out of the simplest.

If this "unfolding" is successfully performed, Marx stated, "if the life of the

54. Marx, Afterword to the Second German Edition of *Capital*, (hereafter cited as Afterword) in *MER*, 301.

55. *Idem*.

56. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 100–101.

subject-matter is ideally reflected as in a mirror, then it may appear as if we had before us a mere a priori construction.”⁵⁷ This statement not only indicates that the conceptual presentation might have a deceptive appearance, but it also shows that the interpretative problem does not end here. For the formal logic of presentation explains only the sequence according to which the concepts are to be “unfolded” or analyzed. It does not, however, automatically define the *epistemological value* of the conceptual presentation, that is, its relation to historical reality. Thus, the formal identity of Hegel’s and Marx’s definition of the logic of presentation is not to be confused with epistemological evaluation. When the two are confused, the result is the illusion that Marx’s *Capital* is identical to Hegel’s *Logic* not only in structure but also in purpose, that *Capital* is Marx’s presentation of the concrete totality of capitalist society. Because of their radically different evaluations of the content of the concept, however, they also differ radically in their epistemological evaluations of the conceptual presentation.

Since Hegel had posited a priori the essentiality of the concept, he could happily conclude that the conceptual presentation is the concrete presentation of reality; and because in the Hegelian framework reality had come to correspond to philosophy, its presentation is literally a closed book. There remains little for historical science to do except perhaps the illustrative activity of subsuming the empirical data to its concepts, the activity of filling in the details. Any phenomena, however, which cannot be defined as manifestations of a conceptual essence are for that reason contingent and arbitrary; and insofar as philosophical logic is based on necessity, any contingent and arbitrary elements are philosophically irrelevant. As was shown above, however, Marx’s materialist analysis of the mode of intellectual production limited the range of the concept by depriving it of its essentiality. As will be shown below, this limitation forced Marx to reconsider the criteria of scientific knowledge and the role of the “contingent.” But it is first necessary to look at his critique of Hegel’s evaluation of the conceptual presentation, for it is on the basis of this critique that he redefined those criteria.

Marx discussed this issue in the section on “Method” in the *Grundrisse*. He first exposed Hegel’s “illusion of conceiving the real as the product of thought concentrating itself, probing its own depths, and unfolding itself out of itself, by itself.” He then rejected the generative power which Hegel attributed to the concept: “the method of rising from the abstract to the concrete is only the way in which thought appropriates the concrete, reproduces it as the concrete in the mind. But this is by no means the process by which the concrete itself comes into being.”⁵⁸ Marx’s goal, then, was not to subsume reality to the concept, but to reproduce it conceptually. However, those same historical-materialist tenets which allowed him to see through the philosophical fetishism of concepts also

57. Marx, Afterword in *MER*, 301.

58. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 101.

forced him to renounce the philosophical luxury of positing the primacy of the concept. He was thus confronted with the above-mentioned epistemological and methodological dilemma: he was obliged to use the concept as the indispensable tool of intellectual labor, as the only means to carry out the reconstruction of reality in thought; yet he also knew that this tool and its product are necessarily abstract.

To solve this dilemma, Marx had to reduce the claims attached to the conceptual presentation. He could not, as did Hegel, define the conceptual presentation as the presentation of historical development in its concrete totality. This by no means implies, however, that the conceptual presentation is worthless, simply that it is limited. Although the conceptual presentation is reduced to a more modest role than that allotted to it by philosophy, it is nevertheless a role which is essential in the historical-materialist analysis of bourgeois society. Rather than posit the conceptual presentation as that of the real, Marx defined its epistemological value in the limited terms of an "abstract presentation of the essential."⁵⁹ The purely conceptual presentation *temporarily* abstracts from real existing, but "contingent," elements which do not correspond to the concept of capital in order to construct a model of how the capitalist mode of production is constructed and how it functions. In so doing it presents the essential in its pure, and therefore historically abstract, form.

This evaluation of the abstract character of the conceptual presentation represents, according to Kosmas Psychopedis, Marx's "methodological breakthrough."⁶⁰ From the viewpoint of Marx's philosophical predecessors, for whom the essential must, by definition, be concrete, the notion of an "abstract presentation of the essential" is a contradiction in terms. Whereas Hegel could maintain that the ascent from the simplest to the most complex attains the essence and encompasses all that is relevant to the *philosophical* conception of the concrete totality, Marx could make no such assumptions. The conceptual ascent can show the essential moments of the mode of production; and only through such an analysis is it possible to expose the exploitation inherent in the relations of production, yet hidden by the illusion of the free market and the formal equality of capitalist and worker entering into the labor contract. But the conceptual presentation as an abstract presentation *cannot* include everything relevant to an *historical* understanding of bourgeois societies in their concrete totality (the rest of the ensemble of social relations and the effective lingering of precapitalist elements). Because for Marx the conceptual presentation is abstract, its long ascent reaches only a plateau, the first stage of a much longer climb toward the concrete totality.

Since Marx conceived of the conceptual presentation as an *abstract* presentation, he could not simply ignore that which does not fit into it. This is diametrically opposed to Hegel's position that empirical data were either to be subsumed

59. Psychopedis, 219.

60. *Idem*.

to their concepts or ignored as merely “contingent.”⁶¹ In order to reach the concrete totality, however, Marx was methodologically required to reintegrate the temporarily “contingent” factors which have no place in the abstract conceptual analysis, but which are essential factors in the project of moving from the abstract to the concrete presentation of a given society.

In order, then, to solve the epistemological dilemmas resulting from a materialist conception of history and its relativizing of the power of thought, Marx recognized and worked through the unavoidability of having to reconstruct reality in abstract categories. He showed the necessity of theoretical or conceptual analysis, but did not reduce reality to concepts. Instead, his “positive science” insisted on the need to include that which does not correspond to the purely conceptual and, therefore, on the need for ever-renewed empirical analysis as theory’s self-critique. In short, he redefined the essential vis-à-vis traditional philosophy. That which for Hegel was merely contingent and thus to be eliminated from consideration was for Marx essential to an understanding of the history of a given society in its concrete and contradictory totality.

This redefinition of what is essential to historical understanding thus contains an accompanying demand for empirical analysis as the means to reintegrate (not to exclude or subsume) the “contingent.” The proper understanding of the structure of the *capitalist mode of production* can only be gained through theoretical abstraction. But the complete understanding of *the history of bourgeois societies* demands empirical analysis of the “contingent” which does not correspond to the conceptual model. This method of gaining historical knowledge recognizes the existence of an inescapable epistemological tension between conceptual and empirical analysis, and it is a method of dialectical movement between them. The role of theory is to reach the inner bond behind the empirical data, and that of empirical analysis to correct theoretical abstraction. Each is necessary, and each alone is necessarily insufficient.

This dialectical movement which accepts the tension, yet tries to reduce the gap, between theory and empiricism, is movement in the direction of the concrete totality. For historical-materialist science, however, the presentation of the concrete totality cannot be contained in a closed book at the end of which the reader has attained “absolute knowledge.” On the contrary, Marx’s *Aufhebung* of philosophy means that knowledge is not the fulfillment of a certain set of criteria. Rather, knowledge is an open-ended project which cannot, in the Hegelian sense, be completed. Marx’s major work, *Capital*, must therefore be read as an open book.

V

In *Capital* Marx was finally able to put his completed theory of presentation into practice. In the first chapter he began with the simplest category, the com-

61. As Hegel says in the *Naturphilosophie* (*Werke* IX, 35), since nature consists of chance, arbitrariness, and disorder, “it is the greatest impropriety (*das Ungehörigste*) to demand of the

modity, and on the basis of his analysis of the commodity, he constructed a model of the capitalist mode of production. According to the preceding discussion of the logic of presentation, the epistemological value of this entire analysis from the simplest category of the commodity through the three volumes of *Capital* is that of an abstract presentation of the essential structure of the capitalist mode of production. Because, however, of the common division of his career into the above-mentioned “young, philosophical” and “mature, economist” Marx, *Capital* is seldom read from the epistemological standpoint first developed in the *German Ideology*. In analyzing its epistemological value, therefore, it is first necessary to show that Marx did intend *Capital* as an abstract presentation of the essential. Then it will be necessary to specify the relation between *Capital* and the actual history of bourgeois societies. This latter issue has, in turn, two parts: an analysis of the historical significance of the sequence of the categories in *Capital*, which shows, too, the limits on Marx’s concept of teleology; and a determination of what Marx temporarily excluded in order to develop this abstract presentation.

First, that the preceding epistemological and methodological discussion does provide the necessary basis for interpreting *Capital* is shown clearly in a number of places. In the Preface to the First Edition, Marx stated that although the natural scientist can use microscopes or experiments, the historical-materialist scientist obviously cannot and is, thus, forced to rely on the powers of abstraction.⁶² And it is this conscious use of abstraction to which Marx pointed on the numerous occasions throughout *Capital* when he posited a normal or pure, that is, an historically abstract, situation in order more sharply to focus on the essential structure of the capitalist mode of production. Finally, and most clearly, in the third volume of *Capital*, after mentioning the existence of local variations of the profit rate, he temporarily dismissed them because: “In such a general study it will always be assumed that the real relations correspond to their concept or, in other words, the real relations will only be presented insofar as they are expressions of their own universal type.”⁶³ Helmut Reichelt maintains, I think correctly, that this passage must be the starting point of every serious study of Marx’s work and that future interpretations will have to be judged according to the degree to which they follow and develop its implications.⁶⁴ What this passage clearly implies is that all of *Capital* is a conscious abstraction from historical reality; and the purpose of this abstraction is to define and delimit the capitalist mode of production.

concept that it should comprehend such contingencies (*Zufälligkeiten*).” For Hegel this is true not only of nature, but also of such natural “contingencies” in the social world as who owns how much (*Rechtsphilosophie*, *Werke* VII, 112).

62. Marx, Preface to First Edition of *Capital*, in *MER*, 295.

63. Marx, *Das Kapital*, III, in *MEW* XXV, 152. My translation.

64. Helmut Reichelt, *Zur logischen Struktur des Kapitalbegriffs bei Karl Marx* (Frankfurt, 1973) 76–77. Although I agree with Reichelt’s evaluation of the importance of this passage, I disagree with one aspect of his conclusion: that it means that Marx had the same concept of truth as did Hegel (77). The reasons will be explained below in the discussion of Marx’s definition of the relations between the “essential” and the “contingent.”

By defining *Capital* as an abstract presentation of the essential, Marx was confronted with the problem of determining the relationship between that conceptual presentation and the historical reality for whose comprehension it claimed to be necessary. As mentioned, there are two elements of this relationship: the degree to which the categories contribute to the understanding of that reality, and the degree to which they abstract from it.

Although *Capital* abstracts from the various, historical capitalist systems, it nevertheless provides a genealogical analysis of the capitalist mode of production by exposing its historical prerequisites. This genealogical analysis is to be found in the historical implications of the sequence of the categories. In *Capital* Marx began with the concept of the commodity as the cell of the capitalist mode of production. In his anatomical analysis of the commodity, he derived from it the money form and, ultimately, capital itself. This “logical” sequence of categories is also of historical significance, though not in terms of a universal philosophy of history; it has, rather, a limited significance applicable only to the immediate prehistory of the capitalist mode of production.

In explaining the historical significance of this categorical ascent from the simple to the concrete, Marx said that “the simpler category can express the dominant relations of a less developed whole, or else those subordinate relations of a more developed whole which already had an historic existence before this whole developed in the direction expressed by a more concrete category. To that extent the path of abstract thought, rising from the simple to the combined, would correspond to the real historical process.”⁶⁵ Thus, as Helmut Reichelt argues, the sequence of categories from the simple value-form to its final metamorphosis into capital is to be understood as the “abstract form of the presentation of that process which historically led to capitalism.”⁶⁶ In this sense the dialectical analysis of the commodity form in the first chapter of *Capital* also portrays an economic development which must have taken place before the capitalist mode of production became possible; it presents, in short, the economic prerequisites of capitalism.

This determination of the limited historical validity of the logical categories also defines the limits beyond which Marx’s concept of teleology cannot be extended. The possibility of the capitalist mode of production already lay in the commodity-form, more specifically, in its exchange value. This does not mean, however, that the potential inherent in the exchange value will be realized in all of those societies in which commodities are produced: “Commodity production and commodity exchange can exist even if the great majority of products are intended for immediate self-use, do not become transformed into commodities, i.e. even if the process of social production is not dominated in its depth and breadth by exchange value.”⁶⁷ In short, it is *not* a foregone conclusion that the more developed forms of money and, especially, capital will evolve from

65. *Ibid.*, 239.

66. Reichelt, 136. See also Alfred Schmidt, *Geschichte und Struktur* (Munich, 1977).

67. Marx, *Capital*, I, 188–189.

commodity production. But where capitalism does exist, it must have these developments behind it as its prerequisites.

Whether this purely economic transformation from commodity-production to capitalism will take place is, however, not an economic, but a social question. For money to be transformed into capital, its owner “must meet in the market with the free laborer, free in the double sense, that as a free man he can dispose of his labor-power as his own commodity, and that on the other hand he has no other commodity for sale, is short of everything necessary for the realization of his labor-power.”⁶⁸ As a provisional explanation of why such a meeting can take place at all, Marx commented:

this relation has no natural basis, neither is its social basis one that is common to all historical periods. It is clearly the result of a past historical development, the product of many economical revolutions, of the extinction of a whole series of older forms of social production. . . . [T]he historical conditions of [capitalism's] existence are by no means given with the mere circulation of money and commodities. It can spring into life, only when the owner of the means of production and subsistence meets in the market with the free laborer selling his labor-power. And this one historical condition *comprises a world's history*.⁶⁹

The completion of this process of the “emancipation” of the worker is thus the essential sociohistorical precondition for the realization of the developmental possibilities latent in the commodity form, the precondition for the transformation of money into production-capital. And only after the economic *and* social prerequisites for the meeting between money-owner and “free laborer” have been fulfilled does economic activity acquire an immanent logic which can be reconstructed teleologically. The range of Marx's concept of teleology, then, is limited by a “world history” to which it *cannot* be applied; it reaches back only to the appearance of a class of free wage-laborers. As Marx stated in the *Grundrisse*, “the dialectical form of presentation is only correct when it knows its own limits.”⁷⁰ And precisely because Marx's concept of teleology knows its own limits, it can specify those historical prerequisites, both social and economic, which make possible the transformation of commodity production from a subordinate to the dominant mode of economic activity; it can thus pinpoint the genesis and portray the historicity of the capitalist mode of production.

Beyond this genealogical analysis and despite the many historical examples Marx employed, *Capital* is not an historical analysis. On the contrary, as an abstract presentation, it is an *ahistorical* analysis. For in order to develop his conceptual presentation of the essential structure of the capitalist mode of production, Marx abstracted from at least four historical elements of bourgeois societies which must be reintegrated in the process of moving beyond the abstract to the concrete.

First, because Marx conceived *Capital* as a general study of the “capitalist

68. *Ibid.*, 187–188.

69. *Ibid.*, 188–189, my emphasis.

70. *Grundrisse*, 945.

mode of production and the conditions of production and exchange corresponding to that mode,”⁷¹ he abstracted from national variations in the evolution of capitalism. This is why he took his historical examples from England as the classic or “pure” case of capitalism.⁷² He felt that all (western and central) European nations would go through the same general development, but with variations which would be essential to understanding the particular history of, and the particular nature of the class struggle in, each nation.⁷³

Second, for purposes of the purely conceptual presentation Marx abstracted from real human beings. As he explained in a “word” to “prevent possible misunderstanding” in the Preface to the first volume of *Capital*: “I paint the capitalist and the landlord in no sense *couleur de rose*. But here individuals are dealt with only in so far as they are the personifications of economic categories, embodiments of particular class-relations and class interests.”⁷⁴ This “word,” however, was neither a plea for forgiveness nor a reduction of the real historical individuals to bearers of economic categories. Rather, it was a methodological signpost that *Capital* is concerned only with the basic structure, functioning, and tendencies of the capitalist mode of production in its pure, “uninhabited” form.

Third, Marx abstracted from all classes in the society except those essential to the capitalist mode of production: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The lingering power of the nobility and the anxious volatility of the threatened petite-bourgeoisie are irrelevant in *Capital*, though essential to understanding the concrete constellation of political power in the various bourgeois societies.

Finally, Marx abstracted from the intervention of any “superstructural” elements in the working of the economy. For example, he did not analyze the relation between state and economy, though fully aware of the concrete importance and complexity of this relationship.⁷⁵ The ways in which state intervention might mitigate the “laws” governing laissez-faire capitalism or might soften the class struggle by instituting some protection for workers is an irrelevant question for the abstract presentation, but an essential one in understanding the various bourgeois societies.

Through these abstractions, Marx was able to focus specifically on the essential structure of the capitalist mode of production and to construct a conceptual model. The many-sided purpose of this abstract presentation was: to show how

71. *Ibid.*, 13.

72. *Idem.*

73. This is why Marx wrote into the “General Rules of the International Working Men’s Association” that the International would be a central coordinating committee, but that the development of political tactics would have to be left to each national section because of the peculiar laws of each country. See Karl Marx, *On the First International, The Karl Marx Library* (New York, 1973), I, 15.

74. Marx, *Capital*, I, 15.

75. In *Capital*, especially in the chapter on the working day, Marx indicates his awareness of how state action could affect the life-cycle of bourgeois society so that its history would not correspond to the conceptual presentation.

the capitalist mode of production is constructed and how it functions; to show its historicity; to expose capitalism as an exploitative mode of production; to show the possibilities of restructuring production; and to show how the illogical logic of capitalism, combined with its revolutionary development of technology, makes possible a new socioeconomic form. Beyond that, however, the three volumes of *Capital* do not make any concrete statements about capitalist societies in their historical diversity. Methodologically, they represent only a first and necessary step in the historical-materialist project.⁷⁶

This epistemological evaluation of *Capital* has important consequences for historical-materialist science. It means that historical-materialist science is not a dogmatic pseudo-science whose truth has been stated once and for all and for which no essential mental labor need be done. Rather it is an “experimental science” based on certain “guiding threads” about the content of history and historical change; and for the modern era it has been further specified in *Capital* with a fundamental theory of the nature of the capitalist mode of production. As shown above, however, it is an open-ended project whose process of inquiry is not, nor can ever be, complete.

VI

Because Marx's materialist conception of history and the abstract presentation in *Capital* represent not a universal philosophy of history, but elements of an epistemologically modest materialist science of history, his project contains a built-in epistemological demand for continued historical analyses as the praxis of that science. Such analyses are the necessary elements of the process of moving beyond the abstract presentation of the mode of production. They are crucial in a double sense: to correct the conceptual presentation itself, and to move from the mode of production to the totalities of bourgeois societies.

After the publication of *Capital* in 1867, Marx and Engels both spent a great deal of time, mostly in letters, explaining that this conceptual presentation was abstract, that it had no universal validity, and that it needed to be refined and corrected through historical analysis. In a letter responding to the misuse of *Capital* by the Russian writer N. K. Mikhailovsky, Marx reiterated the theme present in his work since the *German Ideology* that theory is necessarily abstract and can present only the guiding threads for the study of each nation in its historical specificity. He protested Mikhailovsky's hypostatizing of the “historical sketch of the genesis of capitalism in Western Europe [the study of original accumulation in *Capital*] into an historico-philosophic theory of the general

76. This evaluation of *Capital* as an abstract presentation also explains the abstract status of Marx's “economic laws”: such laws are intended to describe the way capitalism would function if it corresponded to the model and if there were no intervening (“superstructural”) influences. On Marx's use of “laws,” see E. P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory*, 86, and “An Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski” in *ibid.*, 330. Thompson argues, I think correctly, that the term “law” (and despite Marx's use of it) should be replaced with the term “logic of process” as a more accurate description of both historical evolution and Marx's analysis of it.

path of development prescribed by fate to all nations, whatever the historical circumstances in which they find themselves.”⁷⁷

Engels, in a review of Marx's *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, gave theoretical formulation to this recognition of the possibility of divergent paths of historical development. In discussing the role of the conceptual presentation in *Capital* he referred to the theoretical categories of the logical or conceptual presentation as “corrected mirror-images” (*korrigierte Spiegelbilder*) of historical reality, images “corrected according to laws provided by the real course of history.”⁷⁸ Here Engels pointed to one of the essential roles of historical-materialist science as an epistemologically necessary process of using the results of historical analyses to correct or update the purely conceptual analysis. In so doing he also pointed to the necessary epistemological tension in Marx's project between the abstract conceptual presentation and the specific analyses of existing bourgeois societies. In short, even the model of the capitalist mode of production is tentative and demands its own revision.

As indicated above, the epistemological purpose of historical-materialist science is not only to correct the categories of the conceptual presentation, but also to provide the means of moving beyond it to the presentation of bourgeois societies in their concrete totality. As E. P. Thompson has noted, it was Engels, especially in his later letters (and despite his widespread reputation as the one who simplified and popularized Marx's theory), who most clearly defined the role of historical analysis in the Marxian project.⁷⁹

In letters of August and September, 1890, to Conrad Schmidt and Joseph Bloch, Engels reaffirmed the position Marx and he developed in the *German Ideology* and emphasized the tension or gap between the materialist conception of history and historical-materialist analyses. To Schmidt he wrote of the “fatal friends” of the materialist conception of history who use the theory as an “excuse not to study history;” and he emphasized the tentative nature of the theory: “Our conception of history is above all a guide to study, not a lever for construction after the Hegelian manner. All history must be studied afresh, the conditions of existence of the different formations of society must be examined in detail before the attempt is made to derive from them the political, legal, aesthetic, philosophical, religious etc., views corresponding to them.”⁸⁰ And he concluded that little has been done in this “infinitely large” area.⁸¹

In the letter to Joseph Bloch, well-known for its insistence that “the production and reproduction of real life” was only “in the last instance” the determining moment, Engels emphasized the need to study history in all of its complexity. He did acknowledge that Marx and he were partially to blame for the widespread

77. Marx, letter to N.K. Mikhailovsky, November, 1877, in *Marx-Engels: Selected Correspondence* (Moscow, 1955), 293.

78. Friedrich Engels, *Karl Marx*, “Zur Kritik der politischen Ökonomie” in *MEW* XIII, 475.

79. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory*, 162ff.

80. Engels, Letter to Conrad Schmidt, August 5, 1890, in *Selected Correspondence*, 393.

81. *Ibid.*, 437

practice of letting economic theory replace historical-materialist analysis. He made clear, however, that their own focus on economic theory was necessary to develop a model to expose the workings and exploitative character of the capitalist mode of production and to counter those who neglected altogether the role of economics in history.⁸²

It is, of course, possible to minimize or discount altogether the import of these comments as retrospective disclaimers in private correspondence divorced from systematic theoretical elaboration. However, the foregoing reconstruction of Marx's *Aufhebung* of philosophy and the development of his historical-materialist science shows that they describe precisely not only the intent, but also the results of Marx's reflections on the materialist content of history and its epistemological and methodological consequences. This reconstruction of Marx's project shows furthermore that because of its fundamental redefinition of the subject-object relationship and its resulting experimental approach to intellectual production, particularly the study of history, it should not be thrown into the dustbin of "essentialism." Finally, such a reconstruction shows that Marx raised issues which should be of intense current interest because they are related to discussions initiated by Derrida's "decentering" of the knowing subject and his emphasis on the elasticity or "play" involved in intellectual production and by Foucault's attempt to develop a "genealogical" method of historical inquiry. In its dual character as an open-ended materialist science of history and as a discourse on historical epistemology, then, Marx's project continues, in Ernst Bloch's words, to occupy a place in that space which is not the space of the past (*in jenem Raum . . . , der nicht der Raum der Vergangenheit ist*).⁸³

University of Oregon

82. Friedrich Engels, Letter to Joseph Bloch, September 22, 1890, in *Selected Correspondence*, 395–396.

83. Ernst Bloch, *Über Methode und System bei Hegel* (Frankfurt, 1975), 8.